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RUSSIA: Pentecostals & Orthodox to lose buildings on Pacific coast?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Two congregations on Russia's Pacific coast – the Grace Pentecostal Church and the Orthodox parish of the Annunciation – may lose their places of worship after the Sovetskaya Gavan city council abruptly cancelled a contract it had given for the use of a state-owned building, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The cancellation of the Pentecostal's contract came after the town gained a new mayor, Valeri Shevchuk, and a council official told Forum 18 that the Orthodox parish is in the same position as the Pentecostals. "We had a 20-year contract – so why should we move?" the Grace Church's former deacon Andrei Nadtochi told Forum 18 News Service. He said officials have hinted to church members that rental payments for their building under a new "commercial" agreement would be so high that they would give it up of their own accord. The church says it does not have the money to challenge the decision in court or pay higher rent.

A 100-strong Pentecostal congregation in the port of Sovetskaya Gavan on Russia's Pacific coast looks set to lose its worship building after the local city council abruptly annulled the contract under which it uses the premises, forcing the church to leave or to pay a much higher "commercial" rent. The church claims it does not have the money to challenge the decision in court or to rent a new building for services. The decision has also affected the Moscow Patriarchate's parish of the Annunciation in a neighbouring village, a secretary at Khabarovsk and Amur Orthodox diocesan offices confirmed to Forum 18 News Service on 15 March. She added that church representatives dealing with the issue are currently away on a work trip and are therefore not available for comment.

A Moscow-based lawyer specialising in the affairs of religious organisations, Anatoli Pchelintsev, told Forum 18 on 15 March that he was unfamiliar with the specific situation in Sovetskaya Gavan. He added, however, that analogous cases are "very numerous" in Russia, particularly in the Far East, and are intended to damage specifically religious organisations. Typically, the religious organisation concerned is offered rent at approximately 1,000 times that of a commercial firm, said Pchelintsev, so that it is forced to vacate the property.

Grace Church, affiliated to the Moscow-based Pentecostal union headed by Pavel Okara, secured use of a two-storey state property in 1999. Under a contract approved by the then mayor, Yuri Grigoryev, and signed by representatives of both the church and local property and housing committees, the building is offered without charge for a period of 20 years on condition that the Pentecostals use it as a place of worship and carry out extensive repairs at their own expense.

The building was "in an awful state" when the congregation took it over, according to Andrei Nadtochi, a deacon in the church until he moved from Sovetskaya Gavan in 2001. While acknowledging to Forum 18 that the congregation has still to renovate its main hall, he maintained that approximately 70 per cent of the building has been put in good order and a heating system installed.

According to Nadtochi, the current mayor of Sovetskaya Gavan, Valeri Shevchuk, dislikes the Pentecostals. Unable to terminate the contract because the congregation has fully abided by its conditions, he told Forum 18 on 11 March, the municipal authorities last year began to maintain that it should never have been drawn up. Subsequently, he said, Sovetskaya Gavan's councillors decided on 28 August 2003 that all legal contracts offering free use of municipal property must be annulled by the end of that year. In accordance with the councillors' decree, the head of the port's property committee, Olga Prokazina, informed the church in writing on 12 November 2003 that its contract had been terminated. The congregation would have to conclude a rental agreement with the municipal authorities in order to continue using the building, she wrote.

Nadtochi maintains that local officials have hinted to church members that the rental payments under such an agreement would be so high that they would give up the building of their own accord. While he added that a Khabarovsk regional official dealing with religious affairs suggested to the municipal authorities in mid-February 2004 that they should allocate the congregation an alternative building, he believes that there are no legal grounds for doing so: "We had a 20-year contract – so why should we move?" Over the past five years church members have invested substantial sums in repairing the building, he pointed out, and are unable to pay the lawyers' fees required to defend their claim to it.

Pastor Nikolai Ulyanchuk of Grace Church told Forum 18 on 12 March that he had arranged to meet Mayor Shevchuk on three or four occasions in recent months to try to resolve the situation, but had not been received on any of them. Approximately one month ago, he added, city newspaper Sovetskaya Zvezda (Soviet Star) quoted a property committee representative as saying that all municipal premises currently offered for use without charge would go on sale from 1 April 2004.

While this was indeed the case, Prokazina told Forum 18 on 12 March, the current occupants of such properties would be offered the possibility of renting or buying them. She confirmed that the Orthodox parish in the neighbouring village of Maisky was in the same position as the Pentecostal church. Only parishes occupying historical church buildings are legally entitled to their use without charge, she explained, while the Maisky parish worships in a former village council building.

Also speaking to Forum 18 on 12 March, a Khabarovsk regional official who preferred not to be identified initially remarked abruptly that Grace Church's situation was already "settled". Asked how its contract could be declared void retroactively, the official pointed out that it was not a rental contract and that the state was not obliged to offer its property for use free of charge. "It's not a legal issue but a moral one," he maintained. "It was only out of goodwill that they got the building in the first place." He insisted that the Pentecostals would be offered alternative premises, which, he claimed, was in their own interests. "It is a huge building – they don't need that size, they've only managed to put a quarter of it right in the time they've had it."

The same regional official declined to comment on the situation of the Orthodox parish in Maisky, except to say that each case would be decided "on an individual basis".

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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